Words pack a punch in online job recruiting

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"Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." As children, most of us recited this rhyme and hoped it would pack a punch or, better yet, deter a punch. Nonetheless, nearly all of us have experienced the pain that words can cause, even if we tried to convince ourselves otherwise. In the business world, a resume is something that also packs a punch, albeit a different kind of punch—one that delivers power in words. With the right words, a resume can be the key instrument in an applicant getting an interview or landing that much desired job. But what about the employers—do the words they use in writing and developing job announcements help attract quality applicants? That is, what kind of punch do their words pack?

In August 2016, Ioana Marinescu and Ronald Wolthoff presented answers to these questions in their paper, "Opening the black box of the matching function: the power of words" (National Bureau of Economic Research, working paper no. 22508). They found that much research has been done on the effectiveness of employers' screening process once applicants have applied. However, little research has been done on the effectiveness of words that employers use in their job listings to recruit the desired applicants.

In their quest to determine the power of words in job listings, Marinescu and Wolthoff used data from CareerBuilder, an online job recruitment site that advertises about one-third of all job listings in the United States, to analyze job ads that employers posted to attract applicants. The authors looked at the listings from three perspectives: (1) how an employer presents the job, (2) what job title or description is used, and (3) why job titles work more effectively than the Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) system.

For the first perspective, the findings from CareerBuilder data revealed that all job postings included a job title but only a small percentage included a wage or other characteristics of the job. Adding job characteristics did not help more than providing simply the job title, which leads us to the second perspective—words used for the title. The authors found that job applicants use mainly job titles to conduct their searches. In doing so, applicants determine the experience and education required mostly from the job title alone, even without wages posted.

As for the final perspective, the authors' analysis revealed that standard classifications of jobs do not show wage differences as well as job titles do. Job titles have more subcategories than the SOC system—"more than 25 times the number of unique SOC codes" in the researchers' sample. For example, a jobseeker could look under job titles "staff accountant," "senior accountant," and "director of accounting" and would likely perceive their varying wage levels, education levels, and experience requirement.

Marinescu and Wolthoff conclude that employers do indeed use the power of words when posting jobs. Job titles are key in attracting the desired applicant. The words employers used in job titles help pair the desired applicant to

the required wage, experience, and education level and did so more accurately than using the SOC titles. Thus, the job titles that employers use definitely pack a powerful punch.